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Senators to Question Webster Again

CIA Nominee Will Be Asked About FBI Probes of Aid to Contras



By Walter Pincus

Washington Post Staff Writer

The Senate intelligence committee has decided to recall FBI Director William H. Webster for a public hearing Thursday to question him about FBI investigations of assistance to the Nicaraguan contras and possible unauthorized disclosures about them to Lt. Col. Oliver L. North, the former White House aide, according to congressional sources.

The committee is considering Webster's nomination to be director of the Central Intelligence Agency. The FBI director was criticized during his first two days of confirmation hearings earlier this month by senators who questioned Webster's handling of the Iran-contra affair and asked him to be more forthcoming on details.

Webster subsequently supplied new information to the committee from FBI files that will form the basis for Thursday's questioning, sources said.

The committee has not disclosed what data it obtained, but last week

the FBI confirmed it was looking into allegations that North had received information on the bureau's 1985 Miami investigation into gun-running to the contras from Florida.

Thursday's session is not expected to prevent Webster's eventual approval by the committee and confirmation by the Senate, according to congressional sources. Nonetheless, Webster wanted to avoid the additional session and answer any questions in a letter or in private meetings with individual senators, according to sources close to the FBI director.

"There have been questions raised about information that might have been available in field offices and whether this information was fully considered and if not, why not," Sen. William S. Cohen (R-Maine), vice chairman of the committee, told United Press International yesterday.

Sen. Arlen Specter (R-Pa.), who had questioned Webster closely on his role in the Iran-contra affair at the earlier sessions, was one of the committee members who wanted another public hearing, sources

said. Specter also had led the questioning of Robert M. Gates, the acting CIA director. Gates had been the administration's first choice to succeed William J. Casey, who resigned after surgery for a brain tumor.

Gates withdrew his name after the release of the Tower commission's report, saying he believed that it would take too long for him to win Senate approval. Webster then was nominated on March 3, partially in the hope that he would be approved quickly because of his record as FBI director for the past nine years.

Sen. David L. Boren (D-Okla.), chairman of the intelligence committee, said last week that he hoped to get a committee vote on Webster within two weeks, but other members said they believe the Senate may delay approval, at least until the first weeks of public hearings on the Iran-contra affair are concluded. Those hearings start May 5 with testimony on the contra operations, including the FBI inquiries into possible unlawful activities, sources said.